The Confluence

Summer 2021

Swan Valley Connections

From The Director

On a warm evening in mid-June of 2011, I found myself in the Blackfoot Valley, walking along a two-track road that wound through lush green grass and wild irises. The sea of green was framed by distant rolling hills, browned by the summer sun, and dotted with conifers that followed dimpled draws to broad ridgelines. The sounds of center pivots irrigating the surrounding fields, black Angus cows calling to their calves, and crickets chirping in the grass mixed to form a steady hum as we walked up the road. We came upon a dilapidated barn, and as we approached, two owls flew out from the loft. This is one of many fond memories from my time as a Wildlife in the West student. This field program pulled me away from the East Coast cities where I grew up and attended college, and flung me into a landscape I did not know still existed in the continental U.S. I was enamored by the open space, abundance of wildlife, and passionate people dedicated to the land.

Fast forward a decade, and I found myself at the very same barn this June. I was again accompanied by Wildlife in the West students, but this time I was their tour guide through this life-changing experience. Standing in front of the barn, I told the students about the owls, and we decided to peek inside. The floor was littered with feathers and cough pellets, which are the indigestible remains of prey, such as bones and fur, that are trapped in a bird's gizzard and then regurgitated. While so much has changed in the last ten years, some things remain the same.

Wildlife in the West has not changed very much since it first started in 2011. We speak with many of the same stakeholders we did when I was a student and we still study Canada lynx, grey wolves, and grizzly bears. Some of these conservation stories have evolved, as wolves are no longer an endangered species and discussions about grizzly bear delisting continue to develop. What has not changed is the impact this field program has on students. I altered my life because of the program, and I feel so grateful to now lead this life-changing experience. That's what happens when we step outside our comfort zone and into nature, our lives are changed for the better.

The pandemic has changed our world, yet the Swan Valley and surrounding landscapes remain wild. As recreation on our public lands dramatically increases, the reasons people are drawn to the outdoors are consistent: solace, discovery, freedom, reflection, and connection to each other and the natural world. This newsletter specifically explores recreation and how it connects to our mission of conservation and education. You'll read about Leave No Trace principles and get to see firsthand how impactful our education programs are.

Thank you for your continued support to help us connect people to the natural world,

Sara Lamar

Sara Lamar, Education Director

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The Confluence is published by Swan Valley Connections, a non-profit organization situated in Montana's scenic Swan Valley. **Our mission is to inspire conservation and expand stewardship in the Swan Valley.** Images by Swan Valley Connections' staff, students, or volunteers unless otherwise noted. All rights reserved to Swan Valley Connections. Change service requested.

SwanValleyConnections.org

Cover Image: Creek Crossing to Glacier Lake
Back Cover: Common Green Lacewing
Both photos by Andrea DiNino

Summer Soirée IN THE Swan

A FUNDRAISING CELEBRATION

Join us as we welcome the opportunity to celebrate summer in the Swan Valley. After more than a year, we're excited to see all of your faces in person and online! On **Friday, August 27, 2021** we'll gather at the Hungry Bear Bar and Grill at 3:00pm to enjoy cocktails and live music, while raising money for a cause we all love – the Swan Valley!

The beautiful backyard of the Hungry Bear, with views of the Swan Mountains, is the perfect place to enjoy the sounds of Halladay Quist and the Barn Dance Revival Band. Under the event tent we'll share cold beverages, tasty appetizers, good cheer, and a silent auction and raffle to raise money for programs that inspire stewardship of the Swan Valley.

You may attend in person for $40, or join us online for 30 minutes of music and information; everyone will have the opportunity to invest in our online, month-long auction for original art, incredible experiential opportunities, and more, including:

- A custom field experience for you and your family with our expert staff
- A spot in our Master Naturalist class
- A day of exploration with Swan Mountain Outfitters
- An intimate field journaling workshop
- A winter field day tracking rare forest carnivores
- Weekend getaways
- So much more!

All funds raised will go to our top three community benefiting programs: Swan Valley Bear Resources, forest stewardship, and educational programming.

Quick Facts:

- In person - Friday afternoon, August 27, 3:00 pm-5:00 pm in the backyard of the Hungry Bear Bar and Grill
- $40 tickets for hors d'oeuvre, soft drinks, one bar drink ticket, and live music by Halladay Quist and the Barn Dance Revival Band
- Silent auction and raffle tickets to raise funds for SVC programming
- Join online for free from 4:00pm-4:30pm to learn more about Swan Valley Connections, the online auction items, and to hear Halladay Quist and the Barn Dance Revival Band
- Online auction will run from August 9th-29th

Watch your e-mail and social media to find out how to get tickets or to participate in our online auction.

Contact Rebecca if you'd like to donate or volunteer, or have any other questions: rebecca@svconnections.org

Happy Summer!

The Quiet Joy
Attention and Writing the Natural World

By Chris La Tray, Metís writer and SVC Advisory Board Member

It is easy to find awe and wonder and connection with the natural world through Big Things. Big chunks of land set aside in perpetuity. Big mountains. Big bodies of surging water. Big thunderstorms that blast through a valley and, when all the conditions of angles and sunlight and refraction are just right, the Big rainbows that follow. I love these places and their experiences as much as anyone. I love to feel tiny and insignificant in the face of the enormity of the world, whether I'm facing the pounding surf of a rugged coastline or the immense grandeur of the heavens stretching away impossibly in every direction on a night unmarred by light pollution. All of these experiences deserve to be, and must be, protected.

The problem is that these aren't the places where I live. I don't live in the wilderness. My skies are obliterated by light from a city twelve miles distant. If I only live for the magnificent, if this is the only way I can access that measure of awe and smallness, then what kind of life am I living? For me, connecting to the natural world exists in the smallest of things.

An example. I spent all of last May in Crested Butte, Colorado, as an inaugural Mountain Words Writer in Residence. Going in, I really didn't know much about Crested Butte. Geographically it is a decent distance south of me, so I packed shorts and sandals and expected to spend a bunch of time outdoors—between frenzied writing sessions, of course—in relentless sunshine that would send me home buff, bronzed, and bitchin'. What I didn't know is that Crested Butte is situated at 9000' of elevation. The winter there...lingered.

About halfway through my stay in Colorado, when every other day was gray and raining and storming, I was lamenting that all my Missoula friends were posting lovely photographs of flower outbreaks and the like, and I feared I was missing spring entirely. It seemed about the time it arrived among the peaks surrounding Crested Butte, I would be packing to leave, only to arrive in Montana just as the weather transitioned to summer. But then, from my perch in a chair outside on the patio of the home I was staying in on one of the first really nice days, I turned and spied several bunches of tiny purple flowers poking up between the cracks of the flagstones beneath the shelter of the roof's overhang, tucked below the window, where I couldn't see them from inside the house. What a jolt of happiness they provided! What joy! What wonder! "Where did *you* come from?" I said. This was as meaningful an interaction as any I had during my entire stay there, and that is no hyperbole.

I make an effort to connect to these small things, to seek out these tiny interactions, every day. I encourage other people to do so too. I am fortunate to have opportunities to lead writing workshops. These workshops run the gamut from teaching poetry to classrooms brimming with unruly fourth graders, emotional online sessions with incarcerated teenagers, and riverside float trips with adult writers of all ages and experience. My process has evolved to begin the same way regardless of who I am working with. We start with a timed observation period: a minute or two to just look around, see what we see, maybe look for something we didn't initially notice.

"This act of paying attention brings us fully into the present moment experience. We begin to live it, instead of viewing through our own labelling mind. Such a quiet joy to pay attention."

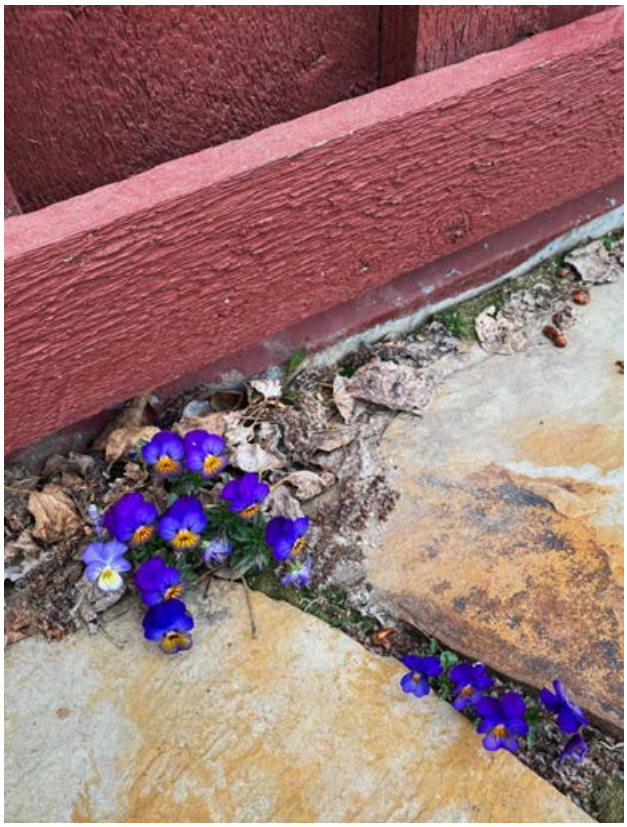
Then another timed period to write down what we remember of that observation. Then we repeat the process, only with our eyes closed. What do we hear, smell, or feel moving through the air? We write it down. It seems overly simple, doesn't it? Because it is! But it is also a critical first step in what I try to encourage as a daily, quiet, meaningful practice. The practice of close, careful observation. So simple, so often ignored, so very important.

My poet friend Andō describes best why we do this when she says, "This act of paying attention brings us fully into the present moment experience. We begin to live it, instead of viewing through our own labelling mind. Such a quiet joy to pay attention."

All writing is nature writing if we think of it as the logical extension of this practice of paying attention. To sights, sounds, and emotion. It is something we must connect to no matter what we write. Like how a painter or photographer learns to observe the play of light across a subject or landscape. Like how a hunter or tracker learns to view the way the slope of a drainage can determine where she might expect to find whatever it is she is looking for. Even like how a surly commuter might learn a route that minimizes stoplights and left-hand turns against traffic. All of these tiny interactions with the world that we take for granted yet comprise an experience that is necessary and, whenever possible, beautiful. Take note of them.

To my left as I write is a window that looks out on my front yard. There is a bird feeder there, and a scraggly cherry tree. In the middle distance are pine-covered hills and a large cliff formation that looms over the Clark Fork River. I have spent hundreds of hours doing nothing more than staring out this window, watching the weather change, or the moon set over the horizon. I note which birds come and go with the rolling of the seasons. I watch flocks of herons and sandhill cranes swoop low over the fields like bombers on approach. I've stood and listened as coyotes yip and yammer in the darkness. I've watched pine siskins punch up from their perches against much larger birds. I've seen a Cooper's hawk snatch a red-winged blackbird right out of the street, and a northern shrike take down a sparrow from a branch of the cherry tree. And oh, that cherry tree, with its green leaves and hot pink flower blossoms arriving, then blowing away in the breeze! The entire world and all its life and death drama on display, right outside my window. Everything is here.

Everything is everywhere if we look for it.

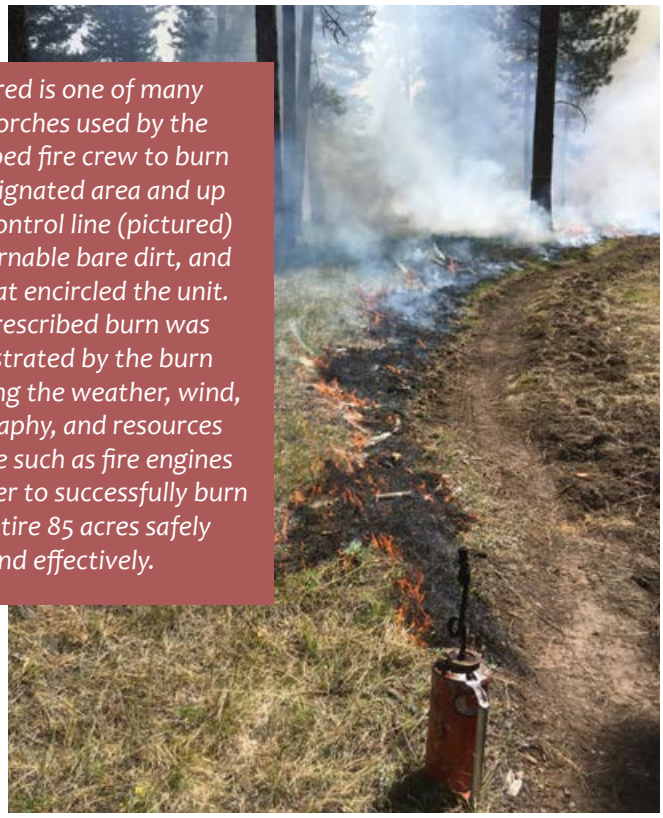


Opposite page and above photos by Chris La Tray

Flame On:
The Role of Fire in Healthy Forests

By Mike Mayernik

It's May 10, 2019, and it's a warm beautiful spring day near Potomac, MT in the Blackfoot Valley, our neighboring valley to the south of the Swan Valley. I am carrying a forestry tool called a drip torch, which releases fire from a wick lit by a 2/3 diesel and 1/3 gasoline mix. I just lit some old bunchgrass, ponderosa pine needles, and dead limbs with the drip torch. The fire slowly snaps and crackles through the spring's sun-dried material and burns right up to the control line.



Pictured is one of many drip torches used by the prescribed fire crew to burn the designated area and up to the control line (pictured) of unburnable bare dirt, and road that encircled the unit. The prescribed burn was orchestrated by the burn crew using the weather, wind, topography, and resources available such as fire engines with water to successfully burn the entire 85 acres safely and effectively.

This is a prescribed, or controlled fire project led by the Nature Conservancy in Montana (TNC). It is actually the first TNC-led prescribed fire in western Montana. The fire is beautiful and mesmerizing as it burns, like a summer campfire with friends and family. The sweet smells released from the burning of vegetation and duff is familiar and grounding. There is a hodgepodge crew of TNC, Bureau of Land Management, Montana Department of Natural Resources (DNRC), University of Montana, Blackfoot Challenge and various volunteers working together on the burn. This burn is one of the last steps in this forest restoration project for this particular stand of ponderosa pine. The planning and preparation for this burn was many years and conversations in the making. Over the course of the day, we burn the understory of about 85 acres, blackening and consuming the dead or dormant vegetation on the ground, and lightly scorching the thick bark of the large overstory ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir trees. Most of these trees will go on to live after this burn, supported by the nutrients released into the soil by the burning of the dead vegetation. A few might succumb to the fire's scorch, but they will become important standing dead trees, or snags, benefiting wildlife habitat.

Fire is good for the forest in many ways. Patches of blackened forests are just as natural as the beautiful green forests with lush vegetation. It is as natural as a rain that falls from the sky in a spring storm and turns the Swan River muddy. It is as natural as the snow that builds up on our Swan Valley homes and piles feet upon feet deep in the Mission Mountains. As stifling as it might be at times, smoke in the air from wildfires nearby and distant every summer and fall is a natural occurrence. Fire in the forests of western Montana is an important ecological process that has been occurring since the last glaciation, about 10,000 years ago. Fires have started by lightning as well as intentionally by Native Americans.

Almost all of the species of plants and animals in the Swan Valley are adapted for fire and respond in various, unique ways to fire. Some species recolonize an area immediately after a fire, while others may take years. Grizzly bears take advantage of the huckleberry patches that grow in a sunny opening created by a fire a few years before. Deer and elk gorge on the lush nutrient-rich green grass and native flowers that regrow from the roots after a burn. Lodgepole pine's pitch-packed serotinous cones open and spread their seeds when they are burned. The forests we see around us are largely shaped by the historical fires that have occurred regularly over hundreds and thousands of years.

And not all fire is created equally. There are low-intensity understory fires that typically burn in lower-elevation forests dominated by ponderosa pines, Douglas-firs, and western larch. Those fires burn through the grass and brush but don't often kill the large trees. There are other fires that burn with high intensity, typically at higher elevations, in the lodgepole pine and spruce forests. Weather and wind, topography, and the distribution of burnable material affect how an area burns. Nature is messy at times, and natural wildfire is a perfect example of that messiness. Another term for that messiness of free-ranging wildfire burning through a forest is called a mosaic. A mosaic is where some patches of trees burn hot, and others not at all. Some areas smolder and no big trees are killed, while other areas leave a burnt patch that looks like toothpicks. This variety, or mosaic created by a wildfire, or many wildfires, at different times with different weather, over time created the diversity in the forest that the wildlife and plants of the Swan Valley are very familiar with, reliant upon, and adapted to.

How do we know that fire has been affecting the forest of the Swan Valley and western Montana for the last 10,000+ years? Fire scars are one sign, and they can be read like the history books of a forest. Fire scars are the upside-down, V-shaped scars that often develop at the base of a tree such as a ponderosa pine or western larch that has been scorched - but not killed - by fires. These scars typically occur on the uphill side of the tree, and they may heal after many years, or they will be scarred again. Fire scars read in the rings of the tree can accurately determine information about the fire history of the forest, and they have shaped many studies on this topic throughout the western United States, and for that matter, the world.

Fire scar at the base of a ponderosa pine in the Swan Valley, showing the history of many low intensity fires burning through this stand in the past.

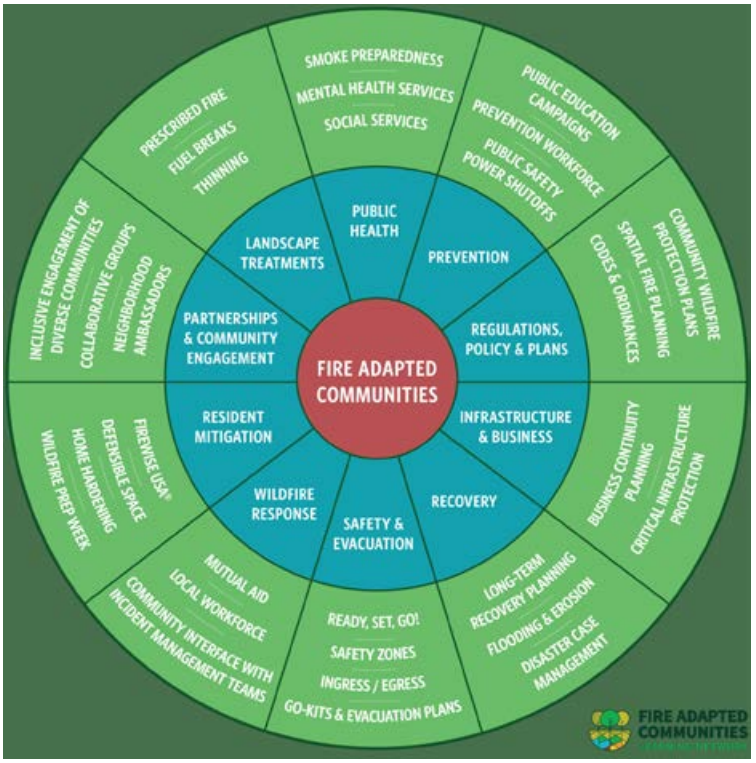
Native American knowledge and traditional use of fire in North America was passed on for generations long before Europeans came to this continent, and one could argue that the use of fire makes us human. It is an important tool we use all the time, even though we might not realize it. We heat our homes with wood or propane. We cook with fire. A lot of our energy and power comes from fossil fuels such as coal or gas. Combustion. Fire. A useful tool.

So, we know that fire is natural here in the Swan Valley and western MT and has shaped what we see today. Yet, every year we humans now put out almost every fire that is started naturally by lightning and all accidental human-caused wildfires. We are very, very good at putting out fires and the public largely wants all fires out. And sometimes, for good reasons. Fires can threaten our properties, our homes, our infrastructure, and our lives.

Approximately 99% of all wildfires are put out every single year. The agencies such as the USFS, BLM, and DNRC have strong workforces of incredible people, heavy equipment, helicopters, and airplanes to attempt to stop wildfires. The American taxpayer spent over $2.2 billion dollars in federal funding for fire suppression in the year 2020 alone (https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/statistics/suppression-costs). Every year more and more money and resources are directed to wildfire suppression, yet every year uncontrollable wildfires race through a community somewhere in the U.S., damaging infrastructure, houses, and worst yet - taking human lives.

But wildfire will continue. It will never go away. The forests that are adapted to being burned or that burned on a regular basis often now have so much dead vegetation, brush, and dead material that they are ready to really burn hot and over large expanses of land. We will always have to deal with wildfire in some way or another. There is no getting around it. And with a rapidly changing climate and extreme weather events becoming more common, the urgency is real. The sooner we learn to live with fire and adapt our way of living and our houses and infrastructure for the eventual fire, the sooner we'll have less angst about fire. The more fires we allow to burn at the right times in the right places, the more opportunities fire managers have to better control or direct fires that are threatening a community. The more regular, low intensity controlled fires combined with forest treatments we do adjacent to our communities, the more likely our infrastructure will survive wildfires. The more proactive we are about living with fire, the less reactive we have to be with throwing money, resources, and lives at uncontrollable wildfires in an attempt to control them.

Back to the prescribed burn in the Blackfoot Valley. The forested ponderosa pine stand was overgrown and too thick with too much dead material and small trees. No fires had burned in the area for years and it was set up to burn in a catastrophic high severity fire, which is not what this particular forest type is adapted for. It is adapted for low intensity understory fires. Therefore, it was thinned mechanically in a way that attempts to mimic a low intensity wildfire, removing the brush and small trees, and allowing the big trees to grow spaced apart or in patches. This forested hillside is primarily ponderosa pine and Douglas fir dry forest, similar to our Swan Valley bottom lands. This forest is made to burn. Everything is flammable at certain times of year. The 6-inch-long ponderosa pine needles, flaky bark, and large cones have piled up on the ground, making the perfect litter for carrying the slow-burning understory fire throughout the entire prescribed unit. As the sun drops on the horizon and the cool night air settles in on this prescribed fire, we look back at the blackened forest floor as an important step in the restoration of western Montana's forests. A dedicated crew will monitor this fire until it is completely out, and then they'll prepare for the next great burn.



Becoming fire adapted will require a combination of many adjustments before, during, and after a wildfire. (Diagram from: https://fireadaptednetwork.org)

A Reflection on Wildlife in the West

By Jon Huber, Wildlife in the West 2021 alumnus and University of Michigan student

Sulk away in the corner of your world,
Basking in comfort, distant from any scintilla of conflict or negativity.
Don't read the news or watch that nature documentary, they are too sad.
Don't volunteer, it's a waste of time.
You need to be working, making money, competing, partying, maintaining that 4.0, having fun! Life's too short.
Individual actions are fruitless, meaningless, worthless.
For how can one man, one woman, one soul heal a fragmenting, warming, aching planet?

And then you find hope, amidst the still, yet vigorous beauty of the Swan Valley.
The Swan and Mission Mountains sandwich acres of luscious green vegetation, charismatic megafauna, small mammals, mosquitoes, and everything in between.
People dedicating their livelihoods to maintain a vibrant, intact, working system.
The tiniest of bugs have a role. Remove them, and the environment is left vulnerable, confused.
Suppress natural fire cycles, and biodiversity disappears in a flash.
Log too many trees, and Canada lynx and other creatures lose vital habitat required for survival.
Ignore a key stakeholder– and anger, unrest, injustice, and ignorance furiously bubble.
Poorly word an EIS, and prepare to get sued.

But it will be alright. Solutions are out there.

They request collaboration. No, they demand it. They feed perilously on everyone's cooperation, sanity, willingness to lead and learn and stand up.
For who else will?

What will happen if our next generations cannot recognize the intricacies, the beauty of a bear rub tree? What will happen when nobody on this planet is alive to see a bull trout? When will we all forget how to navigate using a compass, or triangulate a collar?

"But our planet is warming. Too much disagreement, political polarization, division. Lack of money. The natural world is hopeless. Innocent animals without a voice getting slaughtered left and right. Technology infiltrating every aspect of life, pixels ingrained in the minds of millenials. We will never, ever, have to distinguish a huckleberry from a snowberry, trust me. Who cares if that's a bobcat or lynx scat? They'll all die anyway. Grizzlies, wolves, and pumas are vicious predators that will just eat us all, so run away from the wilderness. Go to that bubble."

But then I go back to Montana. Inner peace absorbs into the central core of my soul. A tourniquet to halt the everlasting bleed of purposelessness. Beauty is out there–waiting for driven individuals to conserve the ecosystem and its critters.

Act now.
Before it fades away from our grasp, without a whimper.

Take these lessons with you. Forever. Never forget that the natural world is priceless. Superior. Worthy.

Grizzly Bear Management Coordinator Chris Servheen reminding us all that the most important skill we can have is to listen to others.

Wolf Biologist Wendy Cole, rancher Trina Bradley, and countless others proving that women can lead just as well as men.

Rob Henrekin being unafraid, unwavering to share his controversial lifestyle as a taxidermist.

Blackfeet people respecting the buffalo through a beautiful tribute, using each and every part of the honored carcass to sustain life. Keeping alive traditions and culture in a world of discrimination. Rising above it, doing whatever they possibly can to instill rich ancestral practices into a blossoming generation of Blackfeet.

"*But then I go back to Montana. Inner peace absorbs into the central core of my soul. A tourniquet to halt the everlasting bleed of purposelessness. Beauty is out there–waiting for driven individuals to conserve the ecosystem and its critters.*"

Selfless instructors fostering an inclusive, welcoming environment, where everyone is open to share their opinions, challenge one another, and ask arrays of questions.

Great people. Infinite lessons. Impossible to even sum up in a 10-minute block.

What you do with these lessons and experiences is up to you. You can go back to your corner.
You can use this journey to only memorize the differences between a grizzly bear track and a black bear track. You can take the 9 credits, and check off your practical experience requirement. You can post that four-second video of a grizzly bear you saw at Glacier National Park, hoping for fame and attention. Or, you can only recall being tortured by mosquitoes, wind gusts, and long days in the field and never step foot outside again.

Or you can synthesize your experiences and change your mindset.
Your actions, beliefs, and relationships do matter.

Talk to people you disagree with, understand their backgrounds, ask the difficult questions. Let their voices be heard. Truly listen. Delve into each and every word they share with you. Understand that their experiences and feelings are valid, and influenced by several parameters you can never truly grasp.

Apply the natural skills into the field with you. Appreciate the next time you see bear scat, a lodgepole, morel mushroom, pipsissewa, antler rub, spitbug, mountain lion scrape, western larch, garter snake, a cambium forage. Embrace old-school practices like using a compass. Keep a nature journal, paying close attention to the subtle, unique, fascinating features the common man would go blind to.

Use your newfound knowledge of the Endangered Species Act, and formulate your own opinions on what should and should not be delisted. Don't do it to merely "win" an argument, or to be better than everyone else. Rather, analyze different perspectives, so your voice is strengthened, uplifted, informed.

The next time you hear a stereotype about Native American tribes, recognize it, and hold the source accountable. Don't call it out from a sense of bitterness, but with the realization that they are misrepresented in popular culture. Spread your experiences with the CSKT and the Blackfeet with great pride, compassion, and love to those around you.

Lastly, stay in touch with the people who made this journey so special. Keep asking questions. Keep being attentive and make these meaningful relationships go deeper. Use the life skills that people taught you – including carrying bear spray and securing garbage in bear country, map orientation, cooking, cleaning, and countless others. Communities like this have the tremendous ability to formulate a sort of "snowball effect" – where positive energy, kindness and openness become contagious for everyone around.

Although there is always the possibility that I will never return to Montana, the lessons that Swan Valley Connections' Wildlife in the West taught me extend beyond state (or even national) borders. In fact, they go beyond boreal forests, as well.

In reality, this program is not about our four focal species. It is not about gray wolves, bull trout, lynx, and grizzly bears. It is about how to effectively approach conservation challenges that our world faces–today and in the future. Humans from all different perspectives and backgrounds must be heard and included, and effective leadership must be in place. Skill sets across the board are vital for the persistence of natural systems. This program is also about growth, as my perspectives have shifted in ways that are still fresh and indescribable.

Talkin' Trash
Making an Impact with Leave No Trace

By Rob Rich

Twelve years ago, while backpacking in broad daylight, I came around a shady bend in the trail, only to find a full moon beaming against a tree. "Oh, I'm sorry," the woman exclaimed, shuffling up her pants and waddling into the brush. "I'm sorry too," I replied, and not merely for the awkward encounter or the unmistakably human stench. Her business was clearly not done, and her side-eyed grimace urged me on. But as I think back on it now, I'm sorry I never circled back to talk about $#!& in the woods.

I didn't have to shame her into realizing that 200 feet – not two feet – is an ideal minimum distance away from water or trails. I didn't have to launch into a tirade about why it's so important to dig a hole at least six inches deep, and I didn't have to extol the virtues of thimbleberry leaves instead of bleached toilet paper. That precise moment might not have been ripe for civil trash talk on such matters, but as I was walking away I could have reached into my pack and tossed her a trowel to borrow, so that she could have taken a first, small step to bury her deeds. But I didn't, and she might still be out there, hardly aware of how she harmed the wild place that we both loved.

That poor woman was not alone. In 1983, the entire city of nearby Missoula was gripped in fears of *Giardia*, an ailment transmitted by a gut-sucking, diarrhea-inducing aquatic microorganism. They dubbed the disease "beaver fever" and blamed the rodents who were active up Rattlesnake Creek, the sole source of the town's drinking water. The issue was concerning enough to prompt the city's massive shift to groundwater-based procurement, which continues to this day. But it also prompted an investigation that dismantled the misleading nickname for the disease: Inadequate waste disposal from increased human hikers and their dogs had caused the *Giardia* outbreak in the Rattlesnake National Recreation Area & Wilderness upstream of the city, not beavers.

Like every other animal, *Homo sapiens* has always relied on the great outdoors to perform daily acts of survival, including pooping. It's hard to pin down where and when we lost the traditional ecological knowledge to respect our carrying capacities, and to prevent problems associated with natural bodily functions or forays to wild places. But it's increasingly easy to see that the scale and scope of modern outdoor recreation is having serious, mounting consequences. Have you ever seen an overflowing trailhead parking lot or trash can? Have you ever trampled out a side trail to avoid mud pocked by horse or mountain bike tracks? Have you ever been surprised by fire coals still warm left by the campers before you? Have you ever heard a deer huff, then flee, as your presence corners her between encroaching trails or roads? Have you ever feared as your dog grows jealous of a bear attracted to the uncontained cooler on a picnic table? If you can't say yes to any of these questions, consider yourself one of the fortunate few.

As activities of localized subsistence have expanded into leisure pursuits with a bona fide outdoor recreation industry, more people have come to identify nature as a playground instead of a shared habitat worthy of responsible, place-based care. A 2019 report from Headwaters Economics suggested that Montana's 33.8 million acres of public land generates $7.1 billion in consumer spending, $286 million in state and local taxes, and 71,000 jobs. 95 percent of polled Montanans suggest that outdoor recreation is important to their quality of life, but these statistics stoke urgent questions: Do the definite benefits that nature provides to human health threaten the vital roles of wild places for other species? Is the access to nature equitable? Are the collective impacts sustainable over the long term? As national parks like Yellowstone and Glacier grapple with how to handle 237 million people annually, the Swan Valley and other nearby public lands with recreation potential must ask these questions too. No single protected area is big enough or connected enough to sustain the needs of diverse, dynamic wild species, and every national park will be too small to absorb the human pressures that surge more and more each year.

Holland Lake and other nearby public campgrounds maintained by the U.S. Forest Service have bear-resistant trash containers and food storage boxes that campers are required to use. If you're camping in the backcountry you should always hang food and other animal attractants 10 feet up and 4 feet out from a tree, always adhering to that other great riff on Leave No Trace: If you pack it in, pack it out.

These prospects can render us speechless and fearful, but three words can help center and endorse better outdoor recreation behaviors: Leave No Trace. These three words are a mantra and a movement, and the heart of an organization devoted to informing and inspiring people to protect the natural world. For 27 years, the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics has taught people how to confront real concerns in outdoor recreation, and how to talk about shared solutions. The message of Leave No Trace is simple, positive, and action-oriented, and it upholds a restorative goal that all people can aspire to achieve. Far more than a commandment policing what thou shalt not, the phrase is a touchstone for Seven Principles that protect nature and promote good experiences on every outdoor adventure:

1. Plan ahead and prepare.
2. Travel and camp on durable surfaces.
3. Dispose of waste properly.
4. Leave what you find.
5. Minimize campfire impacts.
6. Respect wildlife.
7. Be considerate of other visitors.

When you plan ahead and prepare, you're not only practicing safety 101, but also common sense. Doing so is always a combination of internal factors, such as how you're feeling or how the relational dynamics in a group are operating, as well as external factors, such as knowing the weather, terrain, or boundaries you need to respect. Sometimes paraphrased as "know before you go," this practice will make every experience more enjoyable.

Examples of recreation-based threats to the Swan Valley are endless, but drawing on these Seven Principles can help us see that the answers are endless, too. We are lucky to have a legacy of proactive backcountry rangers in the Swan Valley, including Daughter of the Sun Backcountry Services, who currently works in partnership with SVC and the U.S. Forest Service to maintain trails and minimize user impacts in some of our most remote places. We also have Swan Valley Bear Resources (SVBR), which extends and adapts Leave No Trace ethics for its focus on bear coexistence. Beyond its education efforts and bear-resistant trash container and electric fence programs, which help private landowners secure items that could attract bears, SVBR's partnership with the Living with Wildlife Foundation affirms best practices at frontcountry and dispersed campsites on public land in our community. If you would ever like to connect with any of these services or ask a question about specific practices and applications of Leave No Trace, please stop by or call the SVC office (406-754-3137). Otherwise, we look forward to seeing you out in the woods, leaving nothing but care for a shared wild place.

Pets can practice the Leave No Trace Seven Principles too, especially when it comes to respecting wildlife. From horses to hounds, every domestic animal can express unintentionally frightening or damaging behaviors in wild places. Learning to preempt those concerns is essential to protecting other species and your pet's well-being.

— SWAN VALLEY —
CONNECTIONS
6887 MT Hwy 83
Condon, MT 59826-9005

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

UPCOMING EVENTS

Please check our website or call our office at 406-754-3137 for the most up-to-date information, including COVID-19 protocols. Thank you!

JULY 7
Native Fish of the Swan
Zoom Presentation with Beth Gardner (USFS)

JULY 16*
Trail Clearing Day
With Daughter of the Sun Backcountry Services

AUGUST 4
Traditional Use of Fire on the Landscape
Zoom Presentation with Tony Harwood (CSKT)

AUGUST 27
Summer Soiree in the Swan
Fundraising Event at The Hungry Bear Grill (Condon)

AUGUST 28*
Upper Swan River Cleanup

AUG 30- NOV 6
Landscape & Livelihood

LATE AUG/SEPT
SVBR Bear Fair (Ferndale)

SEPTEMBER 1
TBD
Zoom Presentation

SEPTEMBER 13*
ECCA Workday #2
Native Plant Fencing

SEPTEMBER 17
Swan Valley Bear Ranger Fundraiser
At Oro Ranch (Condon)

OCTOBER 6
TBD
Zoom Presentation

OCTOBER 8*
Community Firewood Day

OCTOBER 15*
Swan Legacy Forest (SLF) Workday

*Volunteer opportunity